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ABSTRACT

Empirical studies of stress and self-esteem of early adolescents are limited. The focus of this study was to identify stressors experienced by junior high school students (N=145) between the ages of 11 and 12 years, and to determine if there was a relationship between those stressors and the students' self-esteem. Students responded to the Youth Adaptation Rating Scale to identify stressors and to the Index of Self-Esteem. Eight stressors were reported by more than two-thirds of the students: taking finals or tests; going to junior high school; first day of school; arguments with peers/siblings; going to the dentist or doctor; pressure from parents to get good grades; fights with parents; and getting minor illnesses. The mean number of stressors identified by the students was 16.2 with a range of 3 (minimum) to 33 (maximum). A moderate though significant negative correlation between the number of stressors experienced and the adolescent's self-esteem was also found. Fifteen of the 55 stressors were significantly related to self-esteem issues, and 9 of the stressors were associated with gender. (Author/NB)

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Stressors and Self-Esteem in Junior High Students

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Abstract

Empirical studies of stress and self-esteem of early adolescents are limited. The focus of this study was to identify stressors experienced by junior high students (N=145); ages 11 and 12 and determine if there was a relationship between those stressors and students' self-esteem. Eight specific stressors were reported by more than two-thirds of the students. The mean number of stressors identified by the students was 16.2 with a range of 3 (minimum) to 33 (maximum). The Youth Adaptation Rating Scale (YARS) was utilized to identify the stressors and the Index of Self-Esteem (ISE) was used to measure self-esteem. A moderate though significant negative correlation between the number of stressors experienced and the adolescent's self-esteem was also found. Fifteen of the fifty-five stressors were significantly related to self-esteem issues, and nine of the stressors were associated with gender.

According to Lowe (1983), adolescence was a social invention institutionalized into Western society and used by older adults to control younger adults. Younger adults were "deprived of opportunities to gain a sense of being worthwhile" (p. 251) creating a sense of uselessness and a lowering of self- esteem.

In recent years, children have experienced more stress in their lives due to rapid social changes and constantly rising expectations from parents and society. Parents have been subjected to more pressures themselves and they have looked for ways to alleviate their stress (Elkind 1981). One way parents alleviated stress was by hurrying their children to grow up and assume a larger portion of the responsibilities. This has not been done by parents to harm their children and, in fact, usually has been done unwittingly. Yet, hurrying children through their childhood increases their stress and often leads to troubled behavior during adolescence.

Experts agree that junior high students are experiencing more stress and research recognizes the importance of self-esteem in alleviating stress (National Association of Children's Hospitals and

Related Institutions, 1989, Gilead & Muliak, 1983; Cowles, 1984; Jenks, 1973). Although life stress research about adolescents and children is still in its infancy (Johnson, 1986), further investigation into this area is warranted.

The purposes of the present study were: a) to identify the stressors experienced by early adolescents, b) to discover if there was a relationship between the number of stressors experienced and self-esteem, c) to find out whether particular stressors were more likely to be associated with self-esteem than other stressors, and d) to learn if stressors were associated with gender.

Method

Participants

The participants consisted of 145 seventh grade students (ages 11 and 12) attending a public junior high school in Tucson, Arizona. This was the total number of students in the school whose parents signed the release form. Homes in this school district range in value from $200,000 to over a million dollars, the majority of parents are college graduates involved in professional careers; the school population was 95% Caucasian. Initial contact was made with the principal

of the school, who then obtained approval for this study from the superintendent of the school district.

Instruments

Two questionnaires were used in this study. The first was the Youth Adaptation Rating Scale (YARS; Beall & Schmidt, 1984). The second was the Index of Self-Esteem (ISE; Hudson, 1978).

The YARS contained 56 life events, including one open-ended item concerning "other stressful events", as well as the instruction at the end to "please go back and mark an X through the number of the item that was hardest for you to deal with."

A major purpose of the YARS was to provide adolescents, as well as parents and teachers, with a more accurate idea of the events that may cause stress in adolescents (Beall & Schmidt, 1984). Beal and Schmidt reported a test-retest reliability coefficient of r=.93 using the Pearson product-moment procedure on 234 junior high and senior high school students. The YARS items were generated by adolescents and thus had face validity (Beall & Schmidt, 1984).

The Index of Self-Esteem (ISE; Hudson, 1978), was developed as one of a set of five scales and specifically measures the "extent to which a person feels positive about himself and his social interactions", (p. 1). This scale is a self report scale and consists of 25 items. Twelve items are

positive in nature, (i.e., "I feel that I am a beautiful person") and 12 items are negative, (i.e., "I think that I am a dull person").

A test-retest reliability for the ISE was reported by Hudson and Proctor (1976) as r =.92 while the mean corrected split-half reliability was r =.92. Hudson and Proctor have asserted that the ISE has high construct and face validity. The total time for both questionnaires and discussion was 20-25 minutes.

Procedures

The questionnaires were distributed during one class per period to the students who had returned a parental permission slip. The researcher led a brief discussion of YARS terms such as "V.D.", "stereotyped", "discriminated" and "wallflower". A standard set of instructions was read after the discussion was completed. The students who did not want to participate or who did not have their parent/guardian's permission were given an assignment by the teacher and remained in the room working quietly.

Data Analysis

In order to address the purposes of this study, the following statistical procedures were used. Response frequencies were generated for each item on the YARS. A Pearson correlation coefficient was generated between the YARS "scores" (the number of items checked by each student) and ISE scores. A

Pearson correlation coefficient was generated for each item on the YARS and the ISE score. Finally, t-tests were calculated between male and female scores for each of the 55 items on the YARS.

Results

Of the 145 seventh graders (ages 11 and 12) who participated, 68 were male and 77 were female. The mean number of stressors identified by the students was 16.2 with a standard deviation of 6.3 and a range of 3 (minimum) to 33 (maximum) (Table 1).

There were eight stressors reported by more than two-thirds of the students: "Taking finals or tests", "going to junior high school", "first day of school", "arguments with peers/brothers/sisters", "going to the dentist or doctor", "pressure from parents to get good grades", "fights with parents", and "getting minor illness (cold, flu, etc.)".

No student reported "Getting fired from a job", "getting V.D.", and "going to jail/reform school". Only one student selected "getting someone pregnant/getting pregnant" as a stressor and two selected "not getting promoted to next grade." "Getting caught using drugs", "getting beat up by parents", and "starting to use drugs" were each identified as stressors by three students (Table 1).

Place Table 1 about here

Students were also asked to identify the stressors they considered most stressful ("hardest for you to deal with") (Table 2). "Pressure from parents to get good grades", was selected most often. The second most chosen stressor was a tie between "pet dies" and "fights with parents". "Moving to a different town/school/making new friends", "taking finals or tests", and "death of a close family member" completed the most stressful list.

(Place Table 2 about here)

The Index of Self-Esteem (ISE) was scored giving a possible range of 0-100 in order to discover if there was a relationship between the number of stressors experienced and self-esteem. The ISE mean score for the 145 seventh graders was 62.9 with a standard deviation of 12.8. The scores ranged from a low of 27 to a high of 95. Likewise, responses to the 55 YARS items were summed to yield total scores. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed between the scores on the YARS and the ISE resulting in $r = -.23$, $p < .003$.

Pearson correlation coefficients were generated for each modified YARS item and a student's ISE score to identify the stressors that were more likely to be

associated with self-esteem (Table 3). Fifteen of the coefficients were statistically significant ($p < .05$). In all but one of the fifteen instances the relationships were negative indicating self-esteem was inversely related to those items.

(Place Table 3 about here)

T-tests were calculated for each of the 55 YARS items to identify stressors associated with gender. In each analysis the YARS item represented the dependent variable and gender was entered as an independent variable (Table 4).

(Place Table 4 about here)

Of the 55 YARS items, nine were found to be significant at the .05 level. Seven of these were more significantly linked to the girls: "Going on a diet", "starting to perform (speeches, musical, drama or other performances)", "losing or gaining weight", "starting to go to weekend parties/rock concerts", "fights with parents", "arguments with peers/brothers/sister", and "getting an award, office, etc." The two items which were significantly linked to boys were "referral to the principal's office" and "getting a bad report card." It was interesting to note that the average number of

items checked by girls was 17.04 and by boys 14.88, figures which are supported by the literature (Compas, Davis & Forsythe, 1985; Swearingen & Cohen, 1985).

Discussion

The major purpose of this study was to identify the stressors experienced by early adolescents. The three most frequently selected stressors ("taking finals or tests", "going to junior high school", and "first day of school") were expected. The item, "pressure from parents to get good grades", was the most frequently marked "hardest to deal with" of all the stressors. This item and the next most cited item by the students "fights with parents" both dealt with problems adolescents have with their parents which Lewis, Siegel & Lewis (1984) found to be a main source of adolescent psychological distress.

Not surprisingly, many of the stressors which were the hardest for students to deal with were among those most often cited. A stressor that is experienced more frequently may be regarded as the most difficult (Thoits, 1983). As mentioned, "pressure from parents to get good grades", was among those most frequently identified and the most difficult. "Fights with parents", the seventh most identified stressor, tied with "pet dies" as the second most difficult for the students to deal with. The item which was cited the most ("taking finals or tests") was fifth in the

"hardest" list. Thirty-five students had experienced the "death of a close family member" and this was ranked high in stress by 8 of those adolescents.

In today's mobile society, adolescents are forced to move frequently. Over one-third of this sample (52 of the 145) moved ("moving to a different town/school/making new friends") and found it very stressful, being marked fourth in frequency as hardest to deal with.

Three items were not identified as stressors ("getting fired from a job", "getting V.D.", and "going to jail/reform school"). These items may not be developmentally appropriate for early adolescents.

There was a moderate, though significant, relationship ($r = -23$, $p < .003$) between the number of stressors experienced by students and their self-esteem. This negative correlation suggests an inverse relationship between the number of stressors experienced by the early adolescent and their self-esteem. The fewer stressors experienced by the early adolescent the higher their self-esteem. This finding is consistent with most of the literature (Jenks, 1973; Cowles 1984; Hoffman, Ushpiz & Levy-Shift, 1988; Burt, 1987). It is important to note that this relationship is correlational, therefore, causation cannot be implied. Also, the number of stressors experienced by the early adolescents and their self-esteem scores were

reported as a group mean and individual scores may vary.

Particular stressors were more likely to be associated with self-esteem than other stressors. Fifteen of the fifty-five stressors were related to self-esteem in a statistically significant manner. Fourteen of the fifteen stressors were negatively correlated to student self-esteem, with only "death of parent/guardian" positively correlated. Almost one-half of the fifteen stressors correlated to student self-esteem fall into the personal health and appearance category ("losing or gaining weight", "going on a diet", "acne/warts"), or the social/friendship/ romance category ("trouble getting the opposite sex to like me" or going with someone", "breaking up with boyfriend/girlfriend", "being stereotyped/ discriminated/ bad rumors spread about you", "falling in love") (Compas et al., 1985).

An adolescent's relationship with his/her parents is a main source of psychological distress (Lewis et al., 1984) so it was not surprising to find "fights with parents" and "getting beat up by parents" significantly associated with lower self-esteem. The use of drugs and low self-esteem have been linked by various researchers (Thoits, 1983; Werner, 1986) which helps explain why getting caught using drugs and

starting to use drugs were found to be negatively correlated to self-esteem in this sample.

Thoits (1983) pointed out that individual life events, which are deemed major and undesirable, increase psychological disturbance. "Death of a parent/guardian", "getting attacked/raped/molested/beat up", and "moving to a different town/school/making new friends" -- could be considered major life events and undesirable under most circumstances. "Death of a parent/guardian" was positively correlated with self-esteem and may be particular to the few (only 6) who had had this experience.

Some of the undesirable stressors were not significantly linked to self-esteem. Included in this category are "pressure from parents to get good grades", "taking finals or tests", and "pet dies".

Nine of the fifty-five YARS items were found to be significantly linked to the gender of the adolescents. Of these, the majority (seven) were associated with the female adolescents. The strongest gender association was the item, "going on a diet", which was cited by 47% of the girls as opposed to only 4% of the boys. Siddique and D'Arcy (1984) noted that girls were more externally oriented, people oriented and concerned with others' reactions, while adolescent boys were more internally oriented, less concerned with others' opinions and more likely to exhibit testing behavior.

These findings appear to have held true for the previously mentioned nine items.

The seven stressors associated with females ("fights with parents", "starting to go to weekend parties/rock concerts", "arguments with peers/brothers/sisters", "starting to perform", "getting an award", "going on a diet", and "losing or gaining weight") were more people oriented and concerned with what others expect of them. The two items associated with males ("referral to the principal's office" and "getting a bad report card") were both testing behaviors more accepted from boys. Bush and Simmons (1987) emphasized that during adolescence (age 12 through 19 years) family and school take on a special significance in the lives of adolescents as they prepare for future roles. The nine stressors identified with gender, in this study, fall into the areas of family and school.

Implications for Counselors

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) recently estimated that for every high school of 2,000 or more students in the United States, there is at least one suicide and 30 to 50 suicide attempts each year (The Arizona Daily Star, October 22, 1989). Among possible reasons for the increasing adolescent suicide is family disintegration, stress, lack of school support, high rates of alcoholism and drug abuse, and

inadequate behavioral services. The junior high students surveyed in this study already had experienced some of the reasons for suicide mentioned in the NIMH survey. This would seem to have important implications for junior high counselors. Counselors must become aware of the stress junior high students are experiencing and develop programs to deal with these stressors. Junior high is the time when counselors can assist students in identifying stress and help them develop positive copying skills to deal with some of the more serious events that may/will occur during their adolescent years.

Counselors also need to attend to the gender issues of stress. If the strongest gender association with was the item "going on a diet", information about eating disorders, body image, exercise, and nutrition are important topics for junior high girls. These are also topics that would be of interest to parents and community mental health professionals.

Counselors are in a unique position to objectively view the happenings in the lives of junior high students. Awareness of an increase in stressors affecting specific students can alert to counselor to the possibility of need for special counseling assistance. Increased counselor awareness, knowledge, and understanding of early adolescent stressor can prevent future serious high school problems.

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Table 1: Response Distribution for the Eight Most and Eight Least Checked Items on the Modified Youth Adaptation Rating Scale (N=145)

Item	N Students Responding	Males (%) n=68	Females (%) n=77
Taking tests	132	47.7	52.3
Going to junior high	131	46.6	53.4
First day of school	125	46.4	53.6
Arguments with peers	120	42.5	57.5
Going to dentist/doctor	116	46.6	53.4
Parent pressure-grades	113	47.8	52.2
Fights with parents	110	40.0	60.0
Minor illness	108	45.4	54.6
	.	.	.
	.	.	.
	.	.	.
Caught using drugs	3	0.0	100.0
Beat up by parents	3	33.3	66.7
Starting drugs	3	33.3	66.7
Not promoted-grade	2	0.0	100.0
Pregnancy	1	0.0	100.0
Fired from job	0		
V.D.	0		
Jail/reform school	0		

Table 2: Response Distribution for the Item(s) "that was hardest for you to deal with" on the Modified Youth Adaptation Rating Scale (N=145)

Item	N Students Responding	Males (%) n=68	Females (%) n=77
Parent pressure-grades	15	46.7	53.3
Pet dies	11	81.8	18.2
Fights with parents	11	27.3	72.7
Moving-different town	10	40.0	60.0
Taking tests	9	44.4	55.6
Death-close family	8	25.0	75.0

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Coefficients for each Modified Youth Adaptation Rating Scale item with Self-esteem

Item	n	r	p
Fights with parents	110	-.15	.033
Acne/warts	61	-.14	.047
Opposite sex like me	59	-.38	.001
Problems with teachers	39	-.14	.048
Death of parent	6	.15	.037
Caught using drugs	3	-.22	.004
Attacked/raped/molested	6	-.26	.001
Breaking up	59	-.17	.021
Stereotyped	32	-.24	.002
Moving-different town	52	-.21	.005
Beat up by parents	3	-.25	.001
Starting drugs	3	-.15	.039
Going on diet	39	-.25	.001
Losing/gaining weight	65	-.24	.002
Falling in love	72	-.22	.005

$p < .05$

Table 4: Percentages, Standard Deviations and t-test results depicting the Relationship between Modified Youth Adaptation Rating Scale responses and Gender.

Item	Male		Female		
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	t-value
Fight w/parents	.65	.48	.86	.35	3.02
Referral-principal	.44	.50	.16	.37	3.95
Start parties	.28	.45	.53	.50	3.17
Arguments-peers	.75	.44	.90	.31	2.35
Starting perform	.34	.48	.65	.48	3.91
Getting award	.37	.49	.55	.50	2.16
Going on diet	.04	.21	.47	.50	6.48
Losing/gain weight	.29	.46	.58	.50	3.64
Bad report card	.40	.49	.19	.40	2.73

$p < .05$